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Focusing on academic tourism: demographics, behaviours and impacts

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Abstract

Academic tourism refers to travel activities in higher education contexts. This study has focused on the University of Barcelona (Spain) as an outbound market for international academic tourism. Three specific objectives were set to investigate the demographic profile of outgoing students, their tourist behaviour, and the impacts of their academic mobility. This mixed methods exploratory research entailed conducting a survey among a convenience sample of 70 outgoing students, whose responses were processed through descriptive and inferential SPSS statistical analyses. Additionally, a virtual focus group took place with 3 outgoing students and 3 members of staff from higher education international offices. Content analysis was carried out by means of QDA Miner Lite. The main results indicate that the major push factor was personal growth, followed by the search for new experiences, and linguistic-cultural development, while the principal pull factors were the local language, culture, and tourist attractions. Students mostly stayed at residence halls and rented apartments, used external catering services two or three times a week, and public transport was frequently used. Cultural, nightlife, and gastronomic activities were prioritised. For the majority, monthly expenditure on accommodation ranged between €200 and more than €800. Other additional expenses exceeded €200 for approximately half of our respondents, and nearly a third received some institutional financial support. Study-abroad sojourns enhanced students' autonomy, self-confidence, responsibility, self-knowledge, tolerance, open-mindedness, and knowledge of the local culture. The international mobility experience predominantly met and even surpassed the participants' previous expectations. In conclusion, our findings support the presumed sustainability of academic tourism in comparison to mass tourism. However, the limited representativeness of the sample must be acknowledged, so this study should be considered as a first step towards future expanded investigations.
Keywords: *academic tourism, educational tourism, international mobility, study abroad, tourism impacts*

Introduction

Different study programmes allow university students to benefit from international educational experiences worldwide. Since 1987, the Erasmus programme has been one of the most prominent in the European Union, reaching 12.5 million participants at the end of 2021. In 2021, with a budget of €2,9 billion for nearly 19,000 projects, Erasmus+ involved more than 70,000 organisations and around 650,000 participants in total. Focusing on higher education, in 2021 Erasmus+ funded 3,480 mobility projects. More than 186,000 students taking part in mobility for studies received €425 million, while approximately 78,000 students and recent graduates received €154 million to foster traineeship mobility (European Commission, 2022).

In Spain, Barcelona has always welcomed international students, drawn by this city's tourist attractions and prestigious educational institutions. The University of Barcelona (UB), founded in 1450, is one of the top 200 universities in the world according to the Academic Ranking of World Universities and offers a wide training offer in all areas of knowledge to more than 60,000 students. In 2021-2022, the UB participated in 2,171 agreements with other international institutions and 72 Erasmus+ projects (Universitat de Barcelona, 2022).

Although scholars have explored academic tourism in Barcelona as an inbound destination (Culubret et al., 2022; Crespi-Vallbona et al., 2023; Cruz et al., 2021; Iglesias, 2017), a research gap was identified with respect to analysing this city as an outbound market, so the students of the University of Barcelona (UB) were taken as a case study. This general objective (GO) was broken down into three specific objectives (SO) associated with a set of research questions, namely: to investigate the demographic profile of outgoing UB students, to study their tourist behaviour, and to examine the impacts of international academic mobility on those UB students. The following research questions were posed in relation to these specific objectives.

RQ1. What are the demographic characteristics of students undertaking a mobility abroad?

RQ2. What motivations underlie international mobility?

RQ3. What types of accommodation are used by students during their academic stays?

RQ4. What type of transport do students use to travel around their academic destinations?

RQ5. What are the main leisure activities during students' academic stays?

RQ6. What type of catering services do students use during their academic stays?

RQ7. What are students' monthly expenses during their academic stays?

RQ8. How does international mobility affect students' lives?

RQ9. To what extent does international mobility meet students' expectations?

RQ10. What is students' degree of satisfaction with their academic stays?

The first two questions were linked to the students' profile (SO1) and the last three questions referred to the mobility impacts (SO3), while the rest of the questions were related to the students' behaviour as academic tourists (SO2).

Theoretical background

According to the World Tourism Organization (2019), educational tourism encompasses a wide range of activities related to academic courses, professional studies, language progress, skill improvement, and sports training. Educational tourism includes trips that incorporate formal and/or informal learning elements (Iglesias, 2020, 2021; Liang et al., 2015) and are conducive to personal development in addition to acquiring knowledge (Figueiredo et al., 2020; Gross & Kelman, 2017; Li & Liang, 2020; Long et al., 2010; Mangwane et al., 2019), as well as to professional growth (Figueiredo et al., 2020; Zhang & Gibson, 2021). Educational tourism can take place in different contexts, for example in overnight school excursions (Dale & Ritchie, 2020), field trips complementing formal classes (Kelner & Sanders, 2009), educational cruises (Kang, 2018), sports sojourns (Figuereido et al., 2020), language courses (Iglesias, 2022b), and visits to natural parks (Bancheva, 2015) and rural areas (Ohe, 2018). Educational tourism can thus be combined with heritage tourism (Gross & Kelman, 2017), dark tourism (Jang et al., 2021; Mangwane et al., 2019), and rural tourism (Brune et al., 2021; Fanelli & Romagnoli, 2020), among others, and is closely linked to cultural tourism (Iglesias, 2022c).

Academic tourism is a micro-niche of educational tourism (Iglesias, 2021, 2022a, c). Following Rodríguez et al. (2012), the term academic tourism refers to stays lasting less than one year and carried out in higher education institutions outside a person's usual environment. Domestic academic tourism is carried out by university students within the same country, while international academic tourism entails flows of overseas students (Rodríguez et al., 2012). International students' day-to-day life includes occasional conventional touristic activities, but if they spend more than one year in their academic destination, they are no longer considered tourists (Selby, 2021). A wide range of institutional programmes facilitate academic education worldwide. The European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, known as the Erasmus programme, laid the foundations to travel to different countries around Europe in order to pursue higher academic education. Building on the original Erasmus programme, the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme offered greater opportunities for cooperation between higher education institutions around the world. At present, the total budget for the programming period 2021-2027 is more than €28 billion (European Commission, 2022).

In 2020, student mobility was seriously affected by the COVID 19 pandemic and domestic academic destinations were the first to recover (Iglesias, 2022). In comparison to average international mobility flows between 2016 and 2019, Erasmus+ numbers experienced a drop of 60% in 2020 and 36% in 2021 (European Commission, 2022). Nevertheless, organisations remained interested in Erasmus projects. As for the UB, whereas this institution had welcomed 1,705 incoming international students in 2019-2020, this figure slumped to 554 in 2020-2021 but rose to 1,789 in 2021-2022. With respect to outbound mobility, 1,392 UB students undertook an academic stay abroad in 2019-2020, while in 2020-2021 flows dropped to 781 UB students and in 2021-2022 they increased to 1,281 outgoing students (Universitat de Barcelona, 2022).

The indicators show that international academic tourism is back to full tilt. Hence the importance of exploring its main characteristics, for example in terms of motivations (Figueiredo et al., 2020; Mangwane et al., 2019). The push and pull framework has been widely used to explain the drivers for tourists' choices and behaviours (Dale & Ritchie, 2020; Lee, 2014; Lesjak et al., 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). People travel because they are pushed by internal factors (push factors), or because they are attracted by external factors (pull factors), related to the attributes of the destination (Uysal et al., 2008).

Push factors are usually associated with personal growth, professional progress, linguistic acquisition, and cultural development (Doyle et al., 2010; Lesjak et al., 2015), experiencing novelty abroad, socialising, and having fun (Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008), and low living standards or poor educational options in the home country (Mazzarol &Soutar, 2002), among others. On the other hand, pull factors can be the destination's image, climate, natural environment, and tourist attractions (Ahmad et al., 2016; Lesjak et al., 2015; Llewellyn-Smith & McCabe, 2008), its geographic and cultural proximity, integration opportunities, and educational institutions, as well as education and living costs (Ahmad et al., 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), travel costs and recommendations from acquaintances (Cruz et al., 2021; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), and visa procedures, financial support, and perceived safety and security (Abubakar et al., 2014).

The importance of participating in an international mobility programme lies in the benefits that students obtain for their personal evolution from a sociocultural

point of view (Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2021). The European Commission (2018) has reported that taking part in an Erasmus+ study or training programme enhances the students' employability, as their stay helps them to find their first job and fosters their cultural and social openness, self-confidence, and goal orientation, as well as the development of their interpersonal, communication, intercultural, linguistic, and technical skills. The students have an international projection and clearer study and career prospects after their mobility programme, leading to enhanced professional satisfaction. They are more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, and become more adaptable and interactive with individuals from other cultures. Social engagement and personal growth are therefore coupled with academic development (European Commission, 2018).

The economic, social, and environmental sustainability of academic tourism has been examined, with a positive general balance (Alipour, Fatemi & Malazizi, 2020; Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2021). International mobility in higher education has been acknowledged as an asset for economic development and trade (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). The economic impacts on academic destinations have been highlighted (Matahir & Tang, 2017; Tang, 2021). Academic tourism fosters local consumption patterns among visitors (Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2021), local employment, entrepreneurship, and the diversification of economic activities (Tomasi et al., 2020). International students' longer stays can reduce tourism seasonality and attract visits from friends and relatives (Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2021). Fluctuations in international mobility flows have implications for the economies of both sending countries and academic destinations, not only regarding higher education institutions but also labour markets (Bound et al., 2021). Changing economic and political relationships worldwide have derived into new international mobility streams, benefitting emerging countries and reducing the predominance of Western Anglophone destinations (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Hou & Du, 2020; Lipura & Collins, 2020).

Academic tourism can also help to increase environmental awareness and preserve local habitats, particularly in rural areas (Chen et al., 2020; Tomasi et al., 2020). International students tend to use accommodation options other than non-environmentally-friendly hotels, as they often stay in student residences, shared apartments or with local host families (Rodríguez et al., 2012). Their behaviour is influenced by universities promoting ecological practices (Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2021). However, like any tourism activity, academic travellers can also have a negative impact on their destinations and contribute to their pollution and congestion (Alipour et al., 2020). The global aviation system enables affordable intercontinental student mobility, which relies largely on fossil fuels (Deeks, 2021). Some authors advocate the choice of eco-friendly destinations, transport, catering, and accommodation options, the minimisation of car and air journeys, and the implementation of policies that promote carbon offsets and community projects, as well as applied research (Long, Vogelaar & Hale, 2014; Hale, 2019).

On the other hand, since the local culture plays a key role, academic travel can influence its preservation (Chen et al., 2020) and revitalisation (Tomasi et al., 2020). Furthermore, international students tend to recommend their academic destinations and act as cultural ambassadors (Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2021). The relationship between academic tourists and the host community can favour psychological well-being (Pekerti et al., 2020), socio-cultural discovery (Gross & Kelman, 2017), cross-cultural competences (Long et al., 2010), multicultural inclusivity (Yahya et al., 2020), and global peace (McGladdery & Lubbe, 2017). Since international students have experienced cultural diversity and have raised their cross-cultural awareness, they are more tolerant and prone to civic commitment and to think critically about their beliefs and values (Khalid, Zhanyong & Bibi, 2021). The global higher education ecosystem can thus foster a sustainable, equitable society (Deeks, 2021).

A recent trend has been opting for more intensive, shorter international mobility stays (Iskhakova & Bradly, 2021). Academic tourism in authentic, immersive contexts can result in transformational learning experiences even in short-term stays, but the outcomes may take some time to become evident. To optimise them, international students require guidance in adjusting their mindset (Dou, Fan & Cai, 2023). Therefore, international students' academic, emotional, and sociocultural adjustment has been one of the main research topics (Gümüs, Gök & Esen, 2020; Jing et al., 2020). Scholars are also increasingly interested in exploring the ethical and political dimensions of international student mobility, which entails the social and institutional interaction of international governance bodies, academic destinations' communities and policymakers, outbound countries' communities and policymakers, public and private education providers, educational intermediaries, and, of course, mobile students themselves (Yang, 2020).

Some authors support conceptualising internationalisation in higher education from more ethical, sustainable, and socially inclusive perspectives (Jones & de Wit, 2021). Some challenging issues that may affect international mobility patterns have been identified, such as the rise of nationalism and populism, a severe global economic crisis, climate-related phenomena and natural disasters, restrictive immigration policies, anti-integration and globalisation movements, and health threats like the COVID 19 pandemic (Jones & de Wit, 2021; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). On the other hand, even though universities face the pressure of revenue generation and fierce competition, international cooperation and mutual understanding must be strengthened (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Other authors have claimed that more research is needed to gain a better understanding of the impact of a diverse cultural environment on the socio-cognitive development of mobile students (Khalid, Zhanyong & Bibi, 2021). Our study is oriented in this direction.

Methodology

Following a mixed-methods approach, the primary data collection techniques in this exploratory research were a survey among outgoing UB international students and a focus group. The survey questionnaire, adapted from Culubret et al. (2022), encompassed 25 closed-ended questions using Google Forms and was distributed through QR codes placed in UB faculties and colleges, as well as through social media. A script was designed for the focus group, which took place for 50 minutes via Microsoft Teams and was video recorded (see the script in the Appendix).

In 2022-2023, a total of 1,419 UB students undertook an academic stay abroad (Universitat de Barcelona, 2023). In that context, data from a non-probabilistic convenience sample was gathered in the first semester of 2022. More specifically, 70 UB students who had participated in international mobility programmes abroad sent their anonymous questionnaire responses, while the virtual focus group involved 3 outgoing UB students together with 3 members of staff from higher education international offices based in Barcelona and Portugal.

Table 1: Taxonomy of focus group topics

Category	Subcategory
C1. Student profile	C1.1. Length of stay C1.2. Destinations C1.3. Motivations
C2. Patterns of behaviour	C2.1. Accommodation C2.2. Transport C2.3. Monthly expenses C2.4. Scholarships and grants
C3. Impacts	C3.1. Effects of mobility C3.2. Expectations and satisfaction C3.3. Professional implications

Data processing was based on the models provided by Cruz et al. (2021) and Culubret et al. (2022). The software for quantitative survey results GNU PSPP was used to conduct descriptive and inferential statistical analyses, namely a chi-square test, a one-way analysis of variance test, a bivariate correlation test, and an independent-samples t-test. In addition, qualitative data from the focus group transcript was processed by means of categorisation and content analysis using the software QDA Miner Lite. Table 1 shows the taxonomy of the main topics identified as a preliminary step, where each category was related to their corresponding specific research objective.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative results deriving from the different respondent perspectives and research methods were triangulated.

Results

Survey results

Questions 1 to 11 of our questionnaire were related to identifying the demographic profile of outgoing UB students (SO1). The vast majority of our respondents were women (80%) and their ages ranged between 21 and 25 years old (65.7%), while the rest were aged 26-30 (15.7%), 18-20 (12.9%), or more than 30 (5.7%). Most respondents had only undertaken one academic stay abroad (77.1%), mainly in the fourth (44.3%) or third years (40%) of their university degrees, when they were 21-24 years old (61.4%) or 18-20 (34.3%). However, some students had taken part in two or more mobility programmes. The respondents in our sample mostly studied social and legal sciences (75.7%), followed by arts and humanities (14.3%).

As for the length of their mobility programmes, 71.4% of our respondents spent 4-6 months abroad, and the rest spent 1-3 months (12.9%), 10-12 months (7.1%), 7-9 months (5.7%), or more than 12 months (2.9%). It must be borne in mind that by the end of their first year abroad, this last segment would no longer be considered academic tourists. The largest share of our respondents (65.7%) had been to a European academic destination, whereas 24.3% had visited the Americas, 8.6% had been to Asia, and 1.4% to Oceania.

In regard to drivers for academic mobility, our respondents were able to choose more than one option. The main push factors were personal growth (22.75%), experiencing novelty and excitement (22.35%), and linguistic and/or cultural development (17.65%), although having fun and socialising was also a secondary motivation (14.12%). Figure 1 summarises all the push factors.

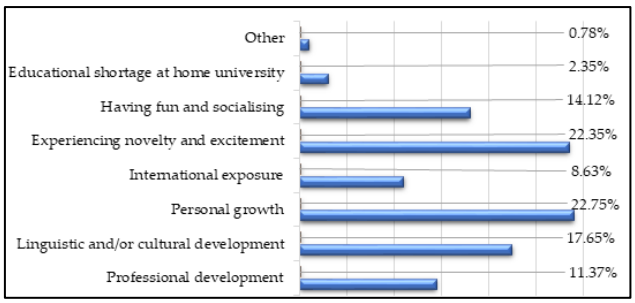

Figure 1: Push factors

The major pull factors pinpointed in our investigation were the destination's language and culture (21.40%), tourist attractions (16.59%), climate and temperature (10.92%), professional opportunities (10.92%), and educational institutions (10.48%). Figure 2 portrays all the pull factors.

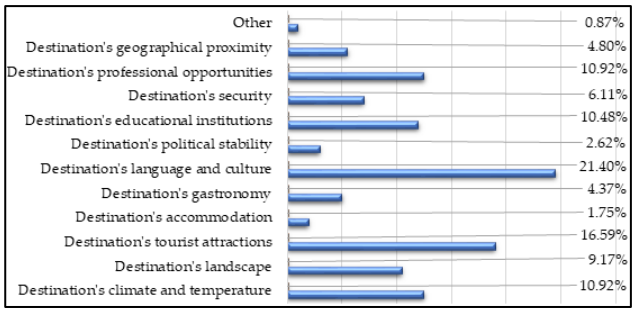

Figure 2: Pull factors

As regards SO2, questions 12-21 dealt with the patterns of behaviour of academic tourists. Our respondents could choose more than one option, and they indicated that they had stayed in a student's residence (46.67%), had rented an apartment with or without other flatmates (45.33%), had stayed with a host family (5.33%), and had lodged at a hotel or hostel (2.67%). External catering services were used twice or three times a week by half of the students (50%), whereas 30% used them once a week, 12.9% more than 5 times a week, and 7.1% wined and dined 4 or 5 times a week. Our respondents took part in a wide range of activities, namely cultural (30.57%), nightlife (26.94%), gastronomic (23.32%), and sports (15.54%). Within their destination, the students travelled by public transport (43.75%), on foot (28.91%), by private transport including taxi, Uber, car or motorbike (14.06%), and by bicycle or scooter (13.28%). Expenditure was a key aspect of students' mobility, and 35.7% reported spending €200-400 every month on accommodation, while 55.7% stated that their monthly expenses excluding accommodation exceeded €201. Table 2 shows monthly expenditure.

Table 2: Monthly expenditure

Monthly expenditure on accommodation	Frequency	Percentage
Less than €200	5	7.1%
€200-400	25	35.7%
€401-600	15	21.4%
€601-800	9	12.9%
More than €800	15	21.4%
Other	1	1.4%
Monthly expenditure excluding accommodation	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
€0-50	1	1.4%
€51-100	4	5.7%
€101-150	15	21.4%
€151-200	11	15.7%
More than €201	39	55.7%

To help them cover their monthly expenses, 65.7% of our respondents received some financial support. More specifically, 27.5% of them benefitted from Erasmus grants, and an array of other scholarships and grants were also provided by the local public administration, the university, and other private institutions.

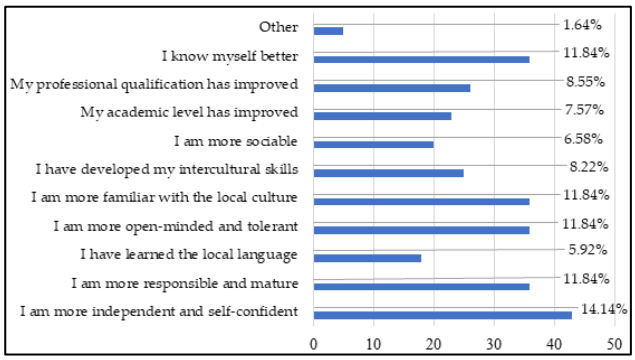

Figure 3: Impacts of mobility

When asked to report the frequency of their interactions with the local community, our respondents affirmed that they had interacted with locals on a regular basis (32.9%), very often (21.4%), quite often (24.3%), or often (15.7%). Only a small minority admitted not having interacted with the local residents very often (4.3%) or hardly ever (1.4%). In addition, 41.4% of the respondents took a language course at the destination to learn the local language.

Finally, questions 22-25 were linked to SO3, aiming at exploring the impacts of international mobility on UB students. The highest satisfaction degree with the study-abroad experience was pointed out by the majority (62.9%), followed by very satisfied (27.1%) or averagely satisfied (8.6%) students. Only 1.4% were not very satisfied and nobody expressed total dissatisfaction. Moreover, 47.1% of the respondents claimed that the expectations they had before initiating their academic stay had been surpassed very favourably. As for the rest, some declared that their expectations had been totally (21.4%) or partially (22.9%) met, while 7.1% admitted that they did not have any prior expectations and 1.4% manifested that their expectations had not been met at all. According to the respondents, the international mobility experience turned them into more independent and self-confident individuals (14.14%). They also became more responsible

and mature (11.84%), more open-minded and tolerant (11.84%), more familiar with the local culture (11.84%), and it was an opportunity for self-discovery (11.84%). Other impacts are outlined in Figure 3.

In addition to the above-mentioned descriptive statistical analyses, various inferential statistical analyses were carried out (an alpha level of .05 was set for all tests). For all the results reported henceforward the null hypothesis was rejected, as there was a significant relationship between the variables analysed. Table 3 shows statistically significant concurrences between push and pull factors resulting from a chi-square test of independence. They suggest that the inner motivations of searching for professional, linguistic, and cultural development, coupled with socialising and international exposure, corresponded to the perceived attractiveness of destinations' features, such as the local language, culture, gastronomy, educational institutions, and potential professional opportunities.

Table 3: Relationship between push factors and pull factors

Variables	*df*	χ^2 value	*p*
Related to push factor: professional development			
Pull factor: destination's language and culture	1	5.18	.023
Pull factor: destination's educational institutions	1	9.59	.002
Pull factor: destination's professional opportunities	1	8.17	.004
Related to push factor: linguistic and/or cultural development			
Pull factor: destination's gastronomy	1	14.97	.001
Pull factor: destination's language and culture	1	3.63	.047
Pull factor: destination's professional opportunities	1	4.18	.041
Related to push factor: international exposure			
Pull factor: destination's professional opportunities	1	4.96	.026
Related to push factor: having fun and socialising			
Pull factor: destination's language and culture	1	3.93	.047

Table 4: Relationship between tourism services and other variables

Variables	*df*	χ^2 value	*p*
Related to accommodation: host family			
Gender	2	17.07	.001
Length of mobility	4	15.45	.004
Related to accommodation: hotel/hostel			
Length of mobility	4	13.95	.007
Related to frequency of catering services			
Academic destination	9	24.01	.004
Related to leisure activities: nightlife			
Age of mobility	3	8.36	0.39
Push factor: experiencing novelty and excitement	1	15.83	.001
Push factor: having fun and socialising	1	5.43	.020
Related to leisure activities: sports			
Length of mobility	4	9.69	.046

The relationship between different mobility aspects and the tourism services provided in the academic destination was also examined by means of a chi-square test of independence. As detailed in Table 4, the length of the academic stay determined the accommodation and sports activities, while nightlife leisure was in tune with the desire to experience novelty and excitement, have fun, and socialize. The frequency of dining was connected with academic destination choice.

Furthermore, an independent-samples t-test (preceded by Levene's test for equality of variances) indicated that the use of public transport in the destination was related to the frequency of interaction with the local community, $t(27.42) = -2.25$, $p < .033$ (equal variances not assumed).

On the other hand, the chi-square tests of independence showed significant coincidences between receiving institutional financial support and choice of destination, looking for and achieving linguistic and cultural gains, and affording certain types of accommodation and leisure. The destination's tourist attractions and the respondents' year of university education seemed to influence monthly expenditure on accommodation, as portrayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Relationship between economic aspects and other variables

Variables	*df*	χ^2 value	*p*
Related to institutional financial support			
Academic destination	3	15.37	.002
Push factor: linguistic and/or cultural development	5	14.10	.015
Type of accommodation: hotel/hostel	1	3.95	.047
Type of leisure activities: nightlife	1	11.28	.001
Impact: more familiar with the local culture	1	5.51	.019
Related to monthly expenditure on accommodation			
Gender	10	21.55	.018
Year of university education	25	38.00	.046
Pull factor destination's tourist attractions	5	12.58	.028
Institutional financial support	5	14.10	.015

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test also revealed that monthly expenditure on accommodation was correlated with two aspects: the satisfaction with mobility, $F(5, 64) = 3.80$, $p < .004$ and the frequency of the interaction with the local community, $F(5, 64) = 3.88$, $p < .004$.

Table 6: Relationship between mobility outcomes and other variables

Variables	*df*	χ^2 value	*p*
Related to repercussions of mobility			
Push factor: linguistic and/or cultural development	1	4.60	.032
Meeting previous expectations	4	17.48	.002
Impact: more independent and self-confident	1	8.58	.003
Impact: more open-minded and tolerant	1	5.70	.017
Impact: more familiar with the local culture	1	5.70	.017
Impact: self-knowledge	1	5.70	.017
Related to meeting previous expectations			
Age of mobility	12	42.85	.001
Push factor: experiencing novelty and excitement	4	12.86	.012
Push factor: educational shortage at home university	4	14.61	.006
Impact: more independent and self-confident	4	16.34	.003

The respondents' views concerning the outcomes of their study-abroad sojourn were analysed in more depth. Table 6 summarises the results of the chi-square test of independence in terms of significant relationships between previous expectations, the repercussions of mobility, and several personal motivations and perceived impacts.

Table 7: Relationship between satisfaction with mobility and other variables

Variables	*F*-test		*t*-test		
	F	*p*	*df*	*t Stat*	*p*
Push factor: experiencing novelty and excitement**	5.57	.021	13.98	2.19	.046
Push factor: educational shortage at home university*	2.49	.120	68.00	-3.23	.002
Repercussion of mobility*	.14	.710	68.00	3.97	.001
Impact: more independent and self-confident**	7.13	.009	68.00	2.44	.017
Impact: more responsible and mature**	10.42	.002	54.68	2.20	.032
Impact: more sociable**	14.04	.001	62.88	2.78	.007

*Note: *Equal variances assumed. **Equal variances not assumed.*

The alignment between the respondents' satisfaction with their academic stay and the motivations and impacts shown in Table 7 also proved to be statistically significant as a result of the independent-samples *t*-test.

The ANOVA test clearly pointed out that satisfaction with mobility was in consonance with meeting prior expectations, $F(4, 65) = 10.74$, $p < .001$. Additionally, a bivariate correlation test was conducted (Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated previously). The bivariate correlation test showed a significant positive correlation between the students' satisfaction with mobility and the frequency of their interaction with the local community, $r(70) = .280$, $p = .019$. To conclude, the relationship between a number of aspects and the effects of mobility from our respondents' perspective were analysed. Table 8 offers the most relevant results of the chi-square test concerning which motivations, destination features, types of accommodation, and leisure activities seem to be conducive to relevant impacts regarding students' personal, academic, and professional development.

Table 8: Relationship between mobility impacts and other variables

Variables	*df*	χ^2 value	*p*
Related to impact: more independent and self-confident			
Push factor: international exposure	1	5.63	.018
Push factor: experiencing novelty and excitement	1	6.33	.012
Related to impact: more responsible and mature			
Push factor: experiencing novelty and excitement	1	5.14	.023
Accommodation used: apartment	1	6.89	.009
Related to impact: knowledge of local language			
Pull factor: destination's language and culture	1	4.12	.042
Pull factor: destination's proximity	1	5.68	.017
Accommodation used: host family	1	5.39	.020
Leisure activities carried out: gastronomic	1	6.39	.011
Related to impact: more open-minded and tolerant			
Accommodation used: apartment	1	4.61	.032
Related to impact: more familiar with the local culture			
Pull factor: destination's tourist attractions	1	4.58	.032
Related to impact: development of intercultural skills			
Pull factor: destination's accommodation	1	7.64	.006
Pull factor: destination's educational institutions	1	5.42	.020
Accommodation used: host family	1	7.64	.006
Related to impact: more sociable			
Push factor: experiencing novelty and excitement	1	6.39	.012
Push factor: having fun and socialising	1	12.63	.001
Pull factor: destination's accommodation	1	4.48	.034
Related to impact: professional qualification			
Push factor: international exposure	1	4.16	.041
Pull factor: professional opportunities	1	5.92	.015
Related to impact: self-knowledge			
Push factor: personal growth	1	7.01	.008
Push factor: international exposure	1	4.94	.026
Pull factor: destination's accommodation	1	4.01	.045

Focus group results

To find out co-occurrences of key ideas and topics within the focus group transcript, textual data was coded, classified into the categories mentioned in Table 1, and analysed. Table 9 shows the number of co-occurrences (Count) and relative frequencies (% Codes) for each category.

With respect to students' profile (C1), the most frequently mentioned topics were motivations (C1.3) and destinations (C1.2). All the focus group participants agreed that the drivers for academic mobility are usually improving students' language skills, living a wonderful international mobility experience, and students' prospective professional development. The international office staff representatives reported that the favourite destinations are English-speaking countries such as the USA, Australia or Canada, as well as some European regions like Holland, France, Croatia, and Germany. They also stated that those students who are not very proficient in English prefer Spanish-speaking destinations like Mexico or Ecuador.

Table 9: QDA Miner Results

Topics	Count	% Codes
Motivations	15	21.1%
Destinations	11	15.5%
Accommodation	10	14.1%
Transport	10	14.1%
Monthly expenses	6	8.5%
Effects of mobility	6	8.5%
Scholarships and grants	4	5.6%
Length of stay	3	4.2%
Expectations and satisfaction	3	4.2%
Professional implications	3	4.2%

Below is a selection of comments provided by the focus group participants:

“In terms of motivations I would say above all the language. I think it is important. The language is also very important for your curriculum, professional training, and personal growth.”

''I think a lot of the students' main focus is to improve their language skills.''

''Listening to how experiences from previous years are described by students with enthusiasm. And there is also the desire to experience something new and intense.''

As for students’ patterns of behaviour (C2), the focus group mainly referred to the types of accommodation (C2.1) and transport (C2.2) used by students during their academic stays. Regarding accommodation, there was a unanimous consensus that the most popular option tends to be a student’s residence, where students live with other students in the same situation and all the services offered are geared towards student life, so there is no need to look outside the residence. However, according to the international office staff members, some students also prefer to rent a flat and share it with other students. The transport used by students during their academic stays depends on the destination. Some destinations are well served by a cheap public transport network, but this is not always the case. The focus group participants also referred to a taxi or Uber as an alternative, even though in some cities like Paris they were not considered affordable options. In addition, other types of transportation solutions were described, such as the Ubike, a project implemented by the University of Beja in Portugal.

Bearing in mind that food and activity expenditure in the destination depends on each student’s purchasing power and budget, it was unanimously agreed that the average monthly expenditure is approximately €100 to €300, depending on the type of activities being carried out. The students who took part in the focus group were able to apply for and receive reasonable grants for their Erasmus stays. Following are some illustrative comments:

“Yes, I chose a student residence. Everyone who was going to Paris did the same.”

“In my case, in Canada renting a flat required a lot of documents, so it was very difficult, and in a residence you have all the services at hand. It is oriented towards students and it is much easier to do all the paperwork.''

''I either used to walk because everything was very close or we used to go by Uber, which was quite cheap compared to Barcelona.''

''In Montreal the metro is very good and the bus is also good. When it snowed, the bus was a bit weird, but we used the metro to get around the city.''

''Beja is a very small city, so it is very easy to walk everywhere. But here, at Politecnico de Beja, we have the Ubike, so all the students who come here can have a free bicycle during the whole mobility period.''

''There were times when you might spend €300, or €200, depending on the months and the trips we made.''

''I think I paid about €100 a month, which is very little.''

''Portugal is very, very cheap, so I think €100 or €120 for food is fine.''

“I think it [the grant] was €150 a month or something like that because it depends on the destination, that is, in accordance to the standard of living in the destination.''

''I had the Erasmus scholarship from the government and it was €200 a month or something like that.''

Concerning impacts (C3), the most recurrent topic was the effects of mobility on international students (C3.1). All the focus group participants unanimously agreed that an academic stay abroad contributes to making students more independent and autonomous, as well as enhancing their language skills. The international office staff members declared that after their mobility experience, they have new objectives and behaviours, as well as a clearer, more open life perspective. All the focus group respondents affirmed that practically all prior expectations are usually met. As a matter of fact, the students claimed that their expectations are often exceeded. The international office representatives believed that the students often cannot even imagine the multiple positive consequences of international mobility for their prospective careers, while the students who took part in our focus group acknowledged that although they had not focused on networking with other international

students during their academic stays, this could be an unexpected benefit in the future in professional terms. The next comments illustrate some of these aspects:

"The biggest impact I had from Erasmus is living alone. I have lived all my life with my parents. I had never been away from home for such a long time."

"I can tell you that I think that 99% of the students are very satisfied and I think that this kind of experience is more than necessary. In my opinion, it should be compulsory.''

"It is true that in the case of the classmates I used to go with, it was not about networking, because in the end we are just students and friends. But we are already connecting on LinkedIn and I do see a certain future for it.''

Discussion

The respondents' profile in our study were predominantly women aged between 21 and 25. They carried out an international academic stay during the third and fourth years of their studies, mostly in the area of social and legal sciences, for 4 to 6 months. European and English-speaking destinations seemed to be favoured. The most common motivations for taking part in an international mobility programme were personal, linguistic, and cultural development, coupled with the desire to live new exciting experiences and socialise in their academic destinations. The main reasons for selecting a specific destination were the local language, culture, attractions and climate, in addition to the prestige of local universities and perceived professional prospects in the destination. The inferential analyses confirmed that these push and pull factors were consistently interrelated, so the results support previous research findings from Ahmad et al. (2016), Doyle et al. (2010), Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe (2008), Lesjak et al., (2015), and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) but minimised the relevance of other factors like the destinations' geographic and cultural proximity (Ahmad et al., 2016; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) or perceived safety and security (Abubakar et al., 2014).

Concerning the tourist behaviour of our respondents, taking into consideration that accommodation and transport preferences depended on their availability in each destination, the most popular lodging options were student residences and rented apartments. Homestays with local families were far less frequent and seemed to be connected with students' gender, which in turn was linked to accommodation expenditure. The majority of our respondents opted for external food and beverage arrangements two or three times a week (an aspect linked to the chosen destination), and public transport was the most frequent, even though students also moved around the host cities on foot, and a minority used other alternatives, like taxi or Uber. The students prioritised cultural, nightlife and gastronomic activities, and almost half of them took a language course at their destinations to learn the local language. These results also align with their main push and pull factors, and indicate that they had a genuine interest in their destinations' culture, while nightlife leisure was congruent with the respondents' young age and social motivations. The inferential analyses also pointed out significant relationships between mobility length and types of accommodation and activities, probably because longer stays favour renting an apartment or practising sports. Our respondents interacted with the local residents quite often, and public transport seemed to facilitate this contact. Therefore, it can be affirmed that the longer academic stays in our study differed from mass tourism trips in terms of less polluting, more integrated patterns of behaviour and attitudes, which could lead to positive environmental and sociocultural impacts for both, the academic tourists and the local residents as stated by Alipour, Fatemi, and Malazizi (2020) and Rodríguez and Martínez-Roget (2021).

Longer stays are also associated with more sustainable practices, as they can entail higher levels of expenditure and consumption in the academic destinations, reduce the negative impacts of seasonality, and foster the diversification of tourism activities (Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2021). Even though the participants in our study had already paid the tuition fees at their home universities, their academic stays were a source of income for the host destinations. Monthly expenditure on lodging mostly ranged between €200 and more than €800, and other expenses were higher than €200 according to more than half of our respondents. Institutional funds, i.e. Erasmus grants and other economic support from public and private organisations, helped to cover travel and living costs for more than half of our respondents, for example with respect to accommodation and night leisure. In turn, this had a repercussion in facilitating interactions with locals and becoming more satisfied with the academic sojourn. Funding also seemed to play a key role in choosing the academic destination in accordance with cultural motivations and gains, and monthly expenditure on accommodation was related to the local tourist highlights. This aspect was explored by Cruz et al. (2021), who concluded that academic tourists preferred to lodge near the main tourist attractions, often in city centres, allowing students to become more familiar with them. An aspect that needs to be explored further is the exact relationship between the year of studies and spending more or less money on accommodation, as well as the mediating effect of gender on housing choice and expenditure.

Overall, the congruence of the results corroborates that our respondents were very satisfied with their study-abroad sojourn, prior expectations were met and even surpassed, and they acknowledged that the experience had positive repercussions for them. Their mobility resulted in enhanced self-knowledge, autonomy, self-confidence, responsibility, tolerance, and knowledge of the local culture, and sociocultural openness, in line with other studies on the impacts of internationalisation (Cruz

et al., 2021; European Commission, 2018; Gross & Kelman, 2017; Iglesias, 2017; Khalid, Zhanyong & Bibi, 2021; Long et al., 2010; Rodríguez & Martínez-Roget, 2021; Yahya et al., 2020). These consequences of mobility were in consonance with the previously mentioned push factors and with another aspect that had not been underscored so far: some perceived educational shortage at the UB. This push factor was not regarded as a primary motivation initially, but seemed to become more relevant when evaluating the mobility experience, which might be due to the fact that international students tend to be exposed to new pedagogical approaches in the host universities, become more aware of new learning possibilities, and gain an insight into their academic path (European Commission, 2018). The respondents' age at the time of their mobility also influences the fulfilment of their expectations, probably because older students have a clearer perspective. Once again, some features of academic tourism stays have a direct correspondence with the final outcomes. For example, those students driven by the desire to experience novelty who stay in an apartment and live with other students become more responsible, mature, open-minded, and tolerant. Those students attracted by the destination's language and culture tend to stay with a host family and enjoy gastronomic leisure activities, which facilitates second language acquisition and the development of their intercultural skills. This fundamental role of accommodation and its consequences on the academic experience is in concordance with previous research findings (Cruz et al., 2021).

Conclusion

To address the research gap that originated this investigation, the initial research questions were eventually answered and the objectives were met. Thus, our study provides an unprecedented overview of how UB students behave as academic tourists abroad, as well as a first-hand account of the consequences of their academic stays. However, the representativeness of our findings is limited by the size and nature of the sample. Reaching more significant conclusions would require a larger number of respondents from a wider range of disciplines. In addition, a more longitudinal research design would amend the limitations of the cross-sectional approach that we adopted.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to gaining new insights in the field of academic tourism since it constitutes a first step towards examining UB international students' patterns of behaviour and consumption of tourism-related services abroad. The positive impacts reported in this investigation support the need for academic tourism activities and the endorsement of their sustainability. This has practical implications for the UB and other associate host universities, as well as for public supranational, national and local administrations, as they should continue promoting and regulating internationalisation policies and investing in them. The obstacles for incoming international students in some destinations ought to be evaluated and counterbalanced, for example in terms of facilitating accommodation or transport arrangements. Conversely, sustainable practices in study-abroad stays, like the Ubike project from the University of Beja, should be regarded as optimal models of reference and the viability of their implementation should be further explored taking into consideration each destination's features.

Future investigations could analyse more representative samples of outgoing academic travellers' profiles, attitudes, and flows across different educational institutions and regions. Changing patterns could be researched to adapt to new trends in the academic tourism micro-niche from an inbound and outbound perspective. Economic aspects like tourism expenditure could be studied in more detail, as well as other social and environmental impacts for international students and their host destinations. More representatives from higher education institutions and public administrations could also take part in further research to identify the strengths and weaknesses in international mobility programmes with the aim of improving study-abroad stays and enhancing their transformational impacts.

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Author contribution

Conceptualization, M.I., L.H. and K.L.; methodology, M.I., L.H. and K.L.; formal analysis, M. I. (inferential statistics), L.H. and K.L. (descriptive statistics); writing—original draft preparation, review and editing, M.I. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Table 10: Focus group script

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Introduction
-Beginning of the focus group session by introducing ourselves (moderators) and our research (objectives).
-Explanation of the purpose of this session, indicating that it will be video recorded and that all the participants can give their opinion freely if they ask for the floor previously.
-Introduction of each participant, asking them for their consent to be recorded and to use their responses for academic purposes.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Ice-breaking questions
Q1. What are your names?
Q2. What are your occupations?
Q3. What are your ages (if you do not mind telling us)?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Specific objectives</td><td>Outgoing UB students</td><td>International office staff</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">SO1. To investigate the demographic profile of outgoing UB students.</td><td>Q1. What was your academic destination?
Q2. When did you undertake your mobility?
Q3. How long did it last?</td><td>Q4. What are the most popular academic destinations for students?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Q4. What discipline were you studying at the time of your mobility?</td><td>Q5. What is the profile of mobility students?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Q6. What are the motivations for students’ mobility?</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">SO2. To study the tourist behaviour of outgoing UB students.</td><td colspan="2">Q1. What type of accommodation do mobile students use?
Q2. What transport do students use in their academic destinations?
Q3. What activities do students take part in?
Q4. What are students’ meal arrangements?
Q5. What are students’ monthly expenses?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Q6. Did you receive financial aid from any institution?</td><td>Q7. What economic support do outgoing students receive?</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">SO3. To examine the impacts of international academic mobility on outgoing UB students.</td><td colspan="2">Q1. What are the impacts of mobility on international students?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Q2. Did your mobility meet your expectations?</td><td>Q3. Are mobile students’ expectations met?
Q4. Are international students satisfied with their mobility?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Q5. What is the impact of academic mobility on international students in professional terms?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">End
-Farewell, thanking all the participants for their contributions.</td></tr>
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